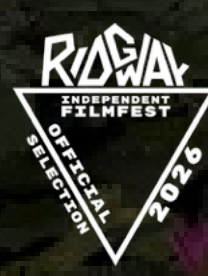
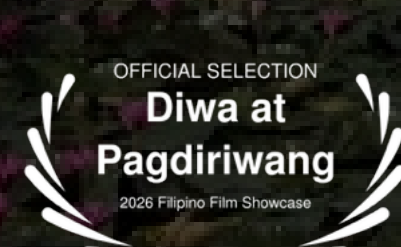




Bridging our Stories

A film by
Rafael Bitanga



A FILIPINO-ALASKAN SHORT DOCUMENTARY

FILM LOGLINE

When the last Filipino community center in Ketchikan, Alaska, becomes a memory, a 50-year-old Filipina who spent her life resisting her heritage travels to the Philippines to rediscover her roots, preserving her community's disappearing culture, and teaching indigenous Filipino dances.

This is a story beyond one culture; it is about the struggle of immigrants to maintain their identity in the U.S., played out on the last frontier.



FILM TRAILER

[Click here to access and download the high-quality trailer.](#)



Ketchikan, Alaska

FESTIVAL & RECOGNITIONS

[Click here to access and download high-quality stills.](#)

Center For Asian American Media Social Issue Documentary Award

InspirASIAN Graduate Student Film Award at CAAMFest

Audience Choice for Best Short at Seattle Asian American Film Festival

Audience Choice for Best Film at Diwa at Pagdiriwang Festival

Best Documentary at FilAm Creative Film Festival



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I was six years old in Laoag City, Philippines, when I first picked up my mom's camera to capture my older sister dancing. Years later, as a seventh grader in Kodiak, Alaska, I made my first documentary about a retired Filipina nurse and teacher. I never went to film school. I learned by pointing cameras at stories no one else was documenting, especially those of Filipino Americans living in Alaska's remote communities. When I met Alma Manabat Parker in Ketchikan, standing in an empty parking lot where her childhood community center once stood, I understood immediately what was at stake. She was teaching Filipino dance in parking lots and gymnasiums, carrying the weight of an entire community's cultural survival on her shoulders. Alma left the Philippines at eight months old. She had no memory of it. She was teaching traditions she wasn't sure she had the right to teach, asking herself the question that haunts so many of us in the diaspora, "Am I Filipino enough?"

Filipino Americans make up 10-12% of Ketchikan's population, yet they remain invisible in Alaska's cultural narrative. Without physical spaces, institutional support, and unbroken connections to the homeland, how does culture survive? Instead of shying away, Alma traveled to the most remote and often considered dangerous regions of the Philippines to learn indigenous practices that most Filipinos never encounter in their lifetime. She received blessings that brought her to tears and discovered that the dances she'd been teaching were only the colonized layer of Filipino culture. Beneath the Spanish influence lay indigenous traditions that paralleled the Alaska Native practices Alma grew up alongside in Ketchikan. This connection, between Filipino indigenous communities and Alaska Native communities, became her bridge between two worlds that had always felt opposed.

I made Bridging Our Stories because Alma's transformation reveals how cultural bearers don't need perfect lineage or an unbroken connection to the homeland. They need commitment, humility, and the courage to become students of their own heritage. Although Alma hasn't secured a new community center, she is a mobile community center, carrying culture in her body and teaching. The empty parking lot remains vacant, but the culture lives on through people willing to do what Alma did, to question, to seek, to learn, and to pass forward both inherited and reclaimed traditions before time runs out.

Rafael Bitanga

Director/Producer/Cinematographer/Colorist



MESSAGE FROM ALMA

Born in the tropics of the Philippines and raised in the rain forest of southeast Alaska, I yearned for a connection to my Filipino identity. Immigrating to the US at 8 months old made me feel "less Filipino", compounded by physical features of full lips, mocha tan skin, and straight, coarse black hair, which did not make me feel accepted by the dominant society's norms. I faced challenges of nurturing my cultural heritage, but often buried it to plant roots of an "American" self.

My father's military transfer to Ketchikan in 1980 was my first exposure to organized Filipino dance classes. I was 8 years old. My mother brought me to weekly lessons at the local Filipino Community center. This was the place where other kids looked like me, we ate the same traditional foods, and spoke the same Tagalog slang. It was the place that my entire being started to feel whole. Our dance group learned traditional Filipino folk dances such as Carinosa, Tinikling, and Pandango sa Ilaw, and we performed at local community events and special celebrations. At that time, Ketchikan's Filipino cultural presence was vibrant and rich, and created a stronger sense of belonging.

The closure of Ketchikan's Filipino Community Center in 2017, accompanied by a declining interest in Filipino youth and the loss of aging "folk experts", created challenges that endangered the passing down of cultural dances and musical performances. It was not until my own personal chapters of college life and raising two beautiful Filipino-African American children evolved that I began my new journey of rediscovery and uplifting the Filipino cultural pride through dance and music in my community.

I created MAGSAYAWAN Ketchikan in 2022 to reinvigorate traditional Filipino folk dance and music; it was a rebirth of my identity, I knew I had but consistently set aside. Magsayawan Ketchikan has created an inclusive and safe space for our local youth to plant, grow, and nurture roots in our Filipino cultural heritage. We centered our work around "culture as medicine" and this serves as a constant reminder that the culture within us allows us to live a healthier and fuller life. Culture is our food to nourish, our medicine to heal, and our stories to uplift.

In 2023 and 2024, I returned to the Philippines after 30+ years since my last visit and immersed myself in authentic folk dance training with cultural bearers from tribal communities in the north and southern islands. I immediately felt connected to the T'Boli and Kalinga tribes as it reminded me of the Alaska native communities that surrounded me in Ketchikan. The traditional dances I learned as a child were influenced by traditional Spanish colonizers, and these new tribal influences reflect the life in southeast Alaska, revolving around cherishing the land and sea that surrounds us. I have found what feeds my soul and heals my heart.

Alma Manabat Parker
Ketchikan, Alaska Filipino Cultural Bearer



KEY CONTRIBUTORS

Director/Producer/Cinematographer/Colorist Rafael Bitanga

Rafael is a 2024 Center for Asian American Media Fellow and receives mentorship from Tadashi Nakamura.

At age six, Rafael's creative journey started when he used his mom's camera to capture his older sister during a dance performance in the Philippines.

Early exposure to the arts sparked his creativity, which came into focus years later. As a 7th grader in Kodiak Island, Alaska, he documented the life of a retired Filipina nurse and teacher. Since then, he has been filming documentaries centered on overlooked stories (particularly Filipina/o Americans).

In 2016, Rafael represented the Kodiak History Museum at the National Arts and Humanities Youth Programs Award, where Michelle Obama highlighted his contributions to photography and filmmaking. Rafael's work has garnered support from the Alaska State Council on the Arts and the Alaska Humanities Forum.

Beyond filmmaking, he teaches digital storytelling to youth and educators across Alaska through the nonprofit See Stories. The power of film and service fuels him to uplift others with dignity. Rafael is a Coca-Cola, Tillman, Horatio Alger, and Live Más Scholar with a B.S. in Hotel Administration from Cornell University and is currently a graduate student at Stanford University.



KEY CONTRIBUTORS



Producer Lailanie Gadia

Raised in Guam, Lailanie Gadia (she/her) is a Filipina American community builder, producer, and financial professional based in Los Angeles. She founded her film company, Mango Stories, to produce impactful projects rooted in community. She serves as Operations Director at the Asian American Documentary Network (A-Doc), supporting 2,000+ film workers, where she helped series produce Emmy-nominated and Silver Anthem award-winning 2022 Asian American Stories of Resilience and Beyond shorts in addition to various filmmaker support programs.

Her producing credits include award-winning CAAM-supported Bridging Our Stories, CAPE-funded Milk & Honey, Third Act (Sundance 2025) and Dive Bar (LAAPFF, Alaska Airlines) along with several projects in development. She has worked with organizations and companies such as Visual Communications, Loyola Productions, 8:45a in various roles related to marketing, sponsorships, and event operations. Named a 2023 DOC NYC Documentary New Leader, she has spoken on panels related to filmmaker sustainability, representation, and funding as well as serving on festival juries. She's a member of BGDM, Documentary Producers Alliance, Global Impact Producers Alliance, Gold House Futures Network, and Film Independent.

She graduated with a B.A. in Economics from Loyola Marymount University, where she serves as a board member of the API Alumni Association. She participated in the 2021 - 2022 Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics Impact program. She previously had a 6-year career in mortgage banking before pursuing a more creative life in 2018 and remains passionate about financial well-being. Visit meetlailanie.me and find her on Instagram [@itslailanie](https://www.instagram.com/itslailanie) [@mangostories.co](https://www.instagram.com/mangostories.co).



KEY CONTRIBUTORS

Editor Diana Diroy

A Sundance Documentary Edit and Story Lab Fellow (2022), Diroy is the editor of the feature documentary *Standing Above the Clouds* (2024), which world-premiered at Hot Docs and won the Bill Nemtin Social Impact Award.

In 2019, she edited the short version of the film, which won Best Documentary Short at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival. Diroy also edited *Fire Through Dry Grass*, Best Feature Documentary at the BlackStar Film Festival, a New York Times Critic's Pick, and part of *POV's* Season 36 on PBS.

In 2021, Diroy was selected for the Sundance Art of Editing Fellowship, and in 2018 was a fellow chosen for the Karen Schmeer Diversity in the Edit Room Program. When Diroy isn't creating, she's teaching video editing at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism and has previously taught youth at the Bay Area Video Coalition and the Educational Video Center in New York. She is based in the San Francisco Bay Area, and continuously strives to collaborate, build community, and make magic with other creatives locally and remotely.



KEY CONTRIBUTORS

Composer Denise Santos

Denise Santos is an Emmy-Winning Filipina Composer based in Los Angeles, California.

A proud 2x Emmy nominee and 1x Emmy winner, Denise draws inspiration from alternative, classical, and world music. Denise's sound blends these genres into powerful, resonant landscapes that honor stories with reverence and innovation.

Her work has been featured in a wide range of films and TV shows, including *I Love Filipino* (Netflix), *Parallel* (VOD), *Island of the Sea Wolves* (Netflix), *Eden: Untamed Planet* (BBC America), and *Primates* (PBS)—the latter earning her a 2021 News & Documentary Emmy for Outstanding Music Composition. That same year, she received the ASCAP Foundation Michelle & Dean Kay Award, recognizing promising composers in the LA area.

Outside the studio, Denise is all about community—whether she's hosting friends, exploring LA's cafe and thrift store gems, or spending time with her husband Josh and their dog Biscuit.



KEY CONTRIBUTORS

Mentor Tadashi Nakamura

Tadashi Nakamura is an Emmy-award-winning filmmaker and the Director of the Watase Media Arts Center, a production company of the Japanese American National Museum. Tadashi was named CNN's "Young People Who Rock" for being the youngest filmmaker at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. Now with over 20 years of filmmaking experience, his films include Nobuko Miyamoto: A Song in Movement (2024), Mele Murals (2016), Gotham Independent Film Award-winning Jake Shimabukuro: Life On Four Strings (2013), A Song for Ourselves (2009), and Pilgrimage (2006).

His latest film, Third Act (Sundance 2025, Independent Lens, Criterion), is about his pioneering filmmaker father, Robert A. Nakamura, and his battle with Parkinson's Disease. Tadashi has an M.A. in Social Documentation from UC Santa Cruz and a B.A. in Asian American Studies from UCLA. He made the DOC NYC '40 Under 40' list in 2019 and was a 2020-2022 Firelight Media Documentary Lab Fellow and a 2022-2023 Sundance Asian American Fellow. He was a mentor for the 2024 CAAM Fellowship and recipient of the 2024 Rockwood Documentary Leaders Fellowship.



MEET THE FILM TEAM

Trailer Editor
Dianthe Mae Montesa

Editor
Diana Diroy

Director
Rafael Bitanga

Main Participant
Alma Manabat Parker

Producer
Lailanie Gadia

Composer
Denise Santos



FULL CREDITS

Directed and Produced by Rafael Bitanga	Fiscal Sponsorship provided by FILM INDEPENDENT Ketchikan Wellness Coalition Scribe Video Center	Thank You	Bridging Our Stories was made possible by the support of Independence Public Media Foundation Center for Asian American Media, with funds provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Rasmuson Foundation Alaska State Council on the Arts Scribe Video Center
Produced by Lailanie Gadia		Deborah Bitanga Hazel Marcelino David Lee Dennis Parker Maya Parker JJ Parker Jackie Yates Czarina Cabillo Mimi Alejandro Blas Tristan Jaycee Blas Alberta Demantle Llorenz Meliton Anne Bugayong Angelique Peregrina Khang Le Francheska Reed Azra Lee Jessica Paxton Oscar Lopez Jasmin Leeward Brian Redondo Kyle Crichton Shayne Nuesca Pearl-Grace Pantaleone Michelle McGaraghan Nazeefa Hossain Nash Consing Janine Spruill Selina Morales Bebs Hack Jason Baldwin April Edquiban Cindy Martin Joey Carranza Chad Panday PJ Raval Joshua Albeza Branstetter Inaya Graciana Yusuf Nuala Cabral Melissa Hamilton Samil Jimenez-Magdalenio Alexia Chororos Jackie Yates Daniel Cardone Nicholas Lu Josaen Ronquillo Eurie Chung Myles Matsuno	Thank You to Our Donors Jan Jorgensen Edermin Paule Optimum Health & Wellness Markos and Hillary Scheer of Premium Aquatics Simply Bella Janet Engle Noah Webb Paul Dennis Manabat Diane Gubatayao Dan & Lori Ortiz Jennifer Gore Dwyer Aftan & Kyan Reeve Marian Scoblic Janet Escueta Juliet Cheatle Ariel Manabat Joana Luban-Clere Heather Deal Erica Steuerwald Charlie Jose Bob Weinstein Andrew Manuel Jennifer Lewis Kristel Mitchel Linda & Amado Montecillo Christine Montecillo Leider Christa Hagan Marta Poore Christa Bruce
Cinematography by Rafael Bitanga	Special Thanks		
Edited by Diana Diroy	Community of Ketchikan Community of Kalinga Community of Adams Ilocos Norte Community of Lake Sebu Lyn Buti Gono Ye Bong Benson Saclag Tongass Federal Credit Union Ketchikan High School Dance Team Kayamanan Ng Lahi Diane Quon Bhawin Suchak Sapana Sakya Don Young Czarina Garcia Colette Ghunim Lily Qi Shuling Yong Beth Aala Theresa Navarro Hajnal Molnar-Szakacs Michael Kinomoto Keisha Knight Laura Forbes Nate O’connor January O’connor Patti Lillie		
Original Music by Denise Santos			
Written by Diana Diroy Rafael Bitanga			
Featuring Alma Manabat Parker			
Contributing Producer Angela Salazar			
Mentor Tadashi Nakamura			
Story Researcher & Administrative Assistant Allyssa Marie Buri			
Sound Mixer Spyros Politis			
Key Art by Kelsey Schwanke			
Trailer Editor Dianthe Mae Montesa			
Archival Footage Courtesy of Alma Manabat Parker			To all the individuals and organizations named and unnamed, thank you for your support in uplifting underrepresented stories.
			Bridging Our Stories is a production of BITANGA PRODUCTIONS and MANGO STORIES.
			This program was produced by BITANGA PRODUCTIONS, which is solely responsible for its content.
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FILM POSTER

[Click here to access and download the film poster.](#) [Click here to the whole folder.](#)



HIGH-QUALITY STILLS

[Click here to access and download high-quality stills.](#)



BEHIND THE SCENES

[Click here to access and download behind the scenes.](#)



FAQ

What sparked the idea for this film?

I moved from the Philippines to Kodiak, Alaska when I was eight years old to join my father, who worked in the canneries. So when I met Alma, I wasn't just meeting a subject, I was meeting a mirror. She was navigating the same impossible question I had carried for years: how do you belong to a place you were never allowed to fully be from? What made her story cinematic was the specificity of her crisis. She wasn't just asking "who am I?" She was standing in an empty parking lot where a building used to be, holding a community together with PVC pipes instead of bamboo. That's not a metaphor. That's a film.

Can you talk about a tough moment during filming and how you handled it?

Mindanao. We were filming in Lake Sebu, South Cotabato, a region most Filipinos themselves avoid because of security concerns tied to the Abu Sayyaf Group. When I told people where we were going, they looked at us like we had made a terrible mistake. But Alma was committed. And I think that commitment was the answer to every fear we had. When you watch someone show up with that level of sincerity, arriving at a T'Boli village having already purchased a kulintang, having already done her homework, the community opens up in ways you cannot manufacture in a safer location. We leaned into the discomfort. That's usually where the film lives.

What's one memory from production that stands out?

The blessing ceremony at Gono Ye Bong Cultural Village. Lyn Buti, the T'Boli cultural bearer, began praying over Alma in the T'Boli language, calling on the spirits, invoking Alma's family in Alaska, extending the blessing across the Pacific. Alma was in tears. I was behind the camera trying to hold steady, and I remember thinking: this is the scene the entire film exists to earn. A Filipino-American woman from Ketchikan, Alaska, who left the Philippines at eight months old, receiving a traditional indigenous blessing in Mindanao. No institution funded that moment. No grant application made it happen. Alma's hunger for it did. My job was just to not get in the way.

How did you pick your cast, especially for the lead roles?

Documentary doesn't give you a casting call, it gives you reality, and then asks you whether you're brave enough to follow it. Alma found me as much as I found her. What I look for is someone whose internal conflict is legible on screen without them having to explain it. Alma has that. You can watch her stand in that empty parking lot and feel everything without a word of narration. That's rare. The supporting storytellers, Lyn Buti in Lake Sebu, Benson Saclag in Kalinga, weren't cast either. They were discovered through Alma's own journey, which is exactly the point. The film's credibility rests on the fact that these relationships are real. Alma earned every encounter.

FAQ

What do you hope people get from watching your film?

I want Filipino-Americans — especially the ones who grew up hiding that identity, who checked ambiguous boxes, who tried to sound less accented — to watch this film and feel seen without feeling pitied. But beyond that specific audience, I want anyone who has ever felt that their version of a culture wasn't "authentic enough" to understand that legitimacy isn't inherited. It's pursued. Alma left the Philippines at eight months old, spent decades trying to be American, lost her mother, lost her community center, and still showed up. That's what makes her a cultural bearer. Not bloodline. Not geography. Commitment.

What techniques did you use to give the film its unique style?

Three things mattered most. First, the archival VHS footage from the 1984 Filipino Community Center Benefit Dinner. That footage doesn't just provide context — it creates grief. You watch a community that no longer has a physical home, and you see what they lost with your own eyes. Second, we committed to verité. The cassava scene, Alma watching Lyn pull roots from the earth with bare hands, visibly scared, works because it was real. Alma was scared. Third, the visual grammar of absence. The parking lot isn't just a location. The PVC pipes aren't just props. Every borrowed gymnasium, every parking lot rehearsal, we treated those spaces as the film's argument. The community center is gone, but look where the culture survives anyway.

What projects are you working on next?

I'm staying close to the Filipino-American experience — that intersection remains deeply underdocumented and cinematically rich. I'm also continuing to develop youth filmmaking education through See Stories, my nonprofit work with young filmmakers across Alaska. The long game here isn't just making films. It's building a generation of storytellers who don't have to wait for someone from outside to come tell their story.

Any tips for someone just starting out in filmmaking?

Follow the specific, it will make it universal. Beginning filmmakers often try to tell stories about big ideas — identity, belonging, culture. But audiences don't feel big ideas. They feel a woman standing in a parking lot where a building once stood. They feel a child's face light up when someone tells them their heritage is worth dancing. Find the specific image, the specific person, the specific moment — and trust that the universal will take care of itself. The other thing: don't wait for permission or perfect resources. Alma was teaching Filipino dance in a parking lot with PVC pipes. I started with my mother's film camera, capturing my sister at a school performance. Start with what's in front of you. That's always been enough.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Shooting Format

Digital

Shot on Sony FX3 with 50mm F1.4, Sigma 28-70 F2.8

iPhone 15 Pro Max using Blackmagic Cam

Aspect Ratio

16x9

Audio Format

5.1 Surround Sound and Stereo

Film Length

24:13 minutes

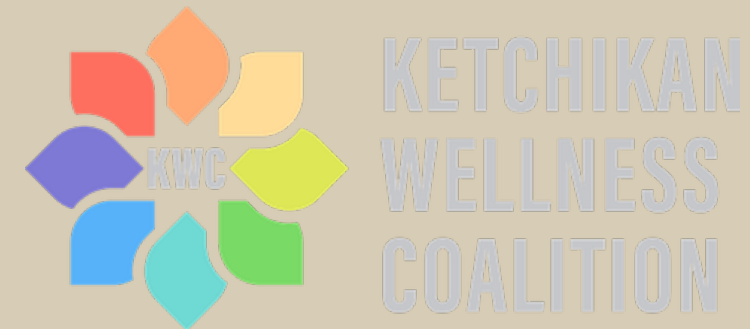
Languages

English, Filipino, T'boli

OUR FUNDERS & PARTNERS



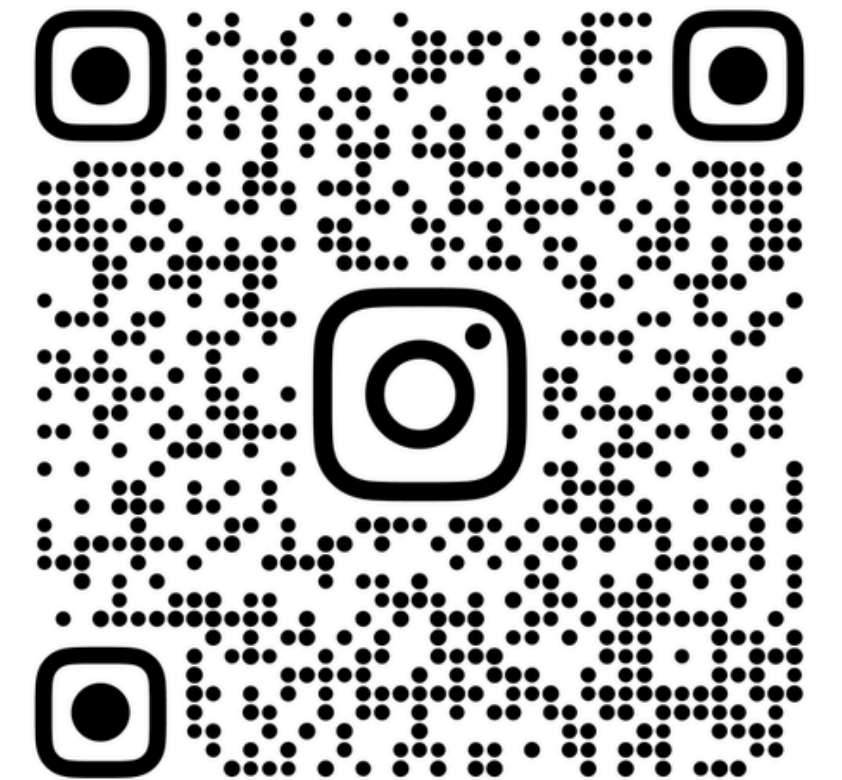
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